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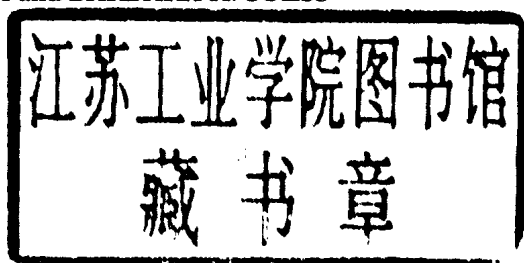
NEW APPROACHES
TO THE
LITERARY ART OF
ANNE BRONTË

EDITED BY
JULIE NASH AND
BARBARA A. SUESS

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NEW APPROACHES TO THE LITERARY ART OF
ANNE BRONTË

The Nineteenth Century

General Editors' Preface

The aim of the series is to reflect, develop and extend the great burgeoning of interest in the nineteenth century that has been an inevitable feature of recent years, as that former epoch has come more sharply into focus as a locus for our understanding not only of the past but of the contours of our modernity. It centres primarily upon major authors and subjects within Romantic and Victorian literature. It also includes studies of other British writers and issues, where these are matters of current debate: for example, biography and autobiography, journalism, periodical literature, travel writing, book production, gender, non-canonical writing. We are dedicated principally to publishing original monographs and symposia; our policy is to embrace a broad scope in chronology, approach and range of concern, and both to recognize and cut innovatively across such parameters as those suggested by the designations "Romantic" and "Victorian". We welcome new ideas and theories, while valuing traditional scholarship. It is hoped that the world which predates yet so forcibly predicts and engages our own will emerge in parts, in the wider sweep, and in the lively streams of disputation and change that are so manifest an aspect of its intellectual, artistic and social landscape.

Vincent Newey
Joanne Shattock
University of Leicester

Preface

Critics and biographers commonly cite an anecdote from Anne Brontë's childhood to explain her place within the famous literary Brontë family. In 1826, the Reverend Patrick Brontë returned from a trip with gifts for his four surviving children. To Branwell, the only boy, he gave a box of wooden soldiers. The next morning, each child chose a soldier and named him; over time they invented personalities and adventures for each soldier.¹ Anne named her soldier 'Waiting Boy', an apt alter ego for the youngest Brontë who would become known for her patience and passivity during her short life (Chitham 25).

Little is known about Anne Brontë's inner life, though the details of her isolated childhood in Yorkshire, her close relationship with her siblings (particularly Emily), her dissatisfying experiences as a governess, her venture into authorhood, and her tragic death at age 29 of tuberculosis have become part of the Brontë legend. What we do know about Anne Brontë is that she did much more than wait. She went to school, she traveled, she worked, and most of all, she wrote. Like her sisters, she began writing in childhood, escaping through her writing into the imaginary world of Gondal that she and Emily created together. Throughout her life, she wrote diary notes, poetry, insightful marginalia, and two very remarkable novels that are the primary focus of this collection.

In 1833, Branwell Brontë wrote that his youngest sister was 'nothing, absolutely nothing' (Chitham 25). Although literary critics have perhaps given her more credit than her brother did, there is no question that the complexity of Anne Brontë's work has just begun to be recognized in the last ten years or so. Her two published novels, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, were widely read and discussed during her lifetime, but her works fell out of favor over time, criticized for being too religious and didactic – an ironic charge since Victorian critics cited 'coarseness' and 'vulgarity' as her biggest flaws. Although scholars have recently exhibited a renewed interest in her life and works, with a number of monographs, articles, and biographies published in the last decade, no-one has compiled a collection of scholarly essays examining her writings. This book, *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, brings together the ideas of some of the top Brontë scholars working today, as well as some bright, new critical voices, to examine the many layers of Anne Brontë's work.

The title of our collection refers to Brontë's writings as 'literary art' for a special reason. Ever since Charlotte Brontë's 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', in which the surviving sister claimed that 'Acton' merely 'reproduce[d] every detail' from her experiences 'as a warning to others' (Chitham 136), many readers have assumed that Anne Brontë's talent lay in autobiography, in a strict representation of life as she knew it. This assumption has some truth to it. Anne, like her sisters, did use her experiences to help shape her works. Indeed,

James R. Simmons, Jr.'s essay in this collection, 'Class, Matriarchy, and Power: Contextualizing the Governess in *Agnes Grey*', demonstrates how accurate her portrayal of the Victorian governess is, making the novel 'a realistic examination of nineteenth-century class issues as well'. But Brontë's writings go one step further, in that they transform experience into art by coupling careful literary techniques with a boundless imagination.

That Brontë harbored ambitions for herself as a published author is evident in another anecdote recounted by Charlotte in her 'Biographical Notice' of her sisters:

One day, in the autumn of 1845, I accidentally lighted on a MS volume of verse in my sister Emily's handwriting [and tried to] persuade her that such poems merited publication. . . .

Meanwhile my younger sister quietly produced some of her own compositions, intimating that, since Emily's had given me pleasure, I might like to look at hers. (Chitham 129)

Far from waiting passively (and probably in vain) for Charlotte to 'accidentally' stumble on her own poetry, Anne 'quietly' but determinedly adds her work to the collection of poems, and begins to spend her evenings revising them for publication. Brontë saw herself as a writer, an artist, not merely a recorder of experience, as the essays collected here demonstrate in new ways.

There is no question that at least one purpose of Brontë's art was to instruct. As she writes in her 'Preface' to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, 'I will not limit my ambition to . . . producing "a perfect work of art": time and talents so spent I should consider wasted and misapplied' (30). Brontë believed strongly that literary art should instruct and improve the minds and lives of its readers. Her strong religious inclination has been well noted, if not always well understood, as Maria Frawley demonstrates in her essay, 'Contextualizing Anne Brontë's Bible'. As Frawley notes, '[a]lthough Brontë may have been devout compared to her sisters, she cannot be said to have had a straightforward, untroubled religious life'. Frawley's analysis of Brontë's Bible notes reinforces the complexity of the religious beliefs that also shape her novels. Marianne Thormählen adds to the discussion of Brontë's spiritual views in 'Aspects of Love in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'. Readers may be surprised to realize that, besides the Bible and other religious readings, Brontë credits romantic love as one of the 'driving forces' of spiritual pilgrimage. In Brontë's novel, Thormählen writes, '[h]appiness in love is associated with determined resistance to forces that militate against the laws of God'. Lee A. Talley examines another of Brontë's religious influences, Evangelical Methodism, in 'Anne Brontë's Method of Social Protest in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*', arguing that 'Anne Brontë's Methodist heritage shapes her realistic approach to worldly and

philosophical problems' in her second novel. Melody J. Kemp also cites the influence of Methodism on Brontë's work, specifically the Methodist emphasis on character formation and 'the belief that character could be self-determined' in 'Helen's Diary and the Method(ism) of Character Formation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'.

The belief that people could change and that no one was predestined either for damnation or glory is one way in which Anne Brontë distanced herself from her sisters, both of whose works contain at least the suggestion of inescapable fate. Agnes Grey, Helen Huntingdon, and Gilbert Markham are all fundamentally good characters that must overcome a number of personal flaws and delusions before they can be worthy of the happiness they eventually achieve. Perhaps the most controversial of these three characters is Gilbert Markham, *Wildfell Hall*'s peevish, violent, and self-important hero whose reformation continues to be debated by critics. This collection contributes a number of divergent views to this debate. In 'A Matter of Strong Prejudice: Gilbert Markham's Self Portrait', Andrea Westcott studies Gilbert's narrative as autobiography to demonstrate 'how little Markham is capable of change'. Westcott argues that Markham's melodramatic effusions in the novel's final section 'afford Brontë an opportunity to parody his clichéd romantic sentiments'. In contrast, Andrés G. López defends Markham, arguing that he has made a spiritual journey parallel to the ones made by Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon. In '*Wildfell Hall* as Satire: Brontë's Domestic *Vanity Fair*', Lopez describes Brontë as Victorian satirist and argues that her 'parallel narratives of growth . . . illustrate that men's and women's respective natures and experiences are similar', a radical belief given the common Victorian myth of separate spheres.

There is no question that one of Brontë's major themes was the double standard applied to the behavior of men and women. In her 'Preface' to *Wildfell Hall*, Brontë, under the pseudonym Acton Bell, answers the critics who are eager to discover the sex of the author:

[I]n my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman would be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man. (31)

Just as Brontë argues here for literary equality between the sexes, she uses her novels to make a case for equality in education, work opportunities, and marriage. Bettina L. Knapp's essay, 'Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*: The Feminist; "I must stand alone"', examines *Agnes Grey* as the medium through which 'Brontë's voice was

raised against . . . offensive treatment accorded to governesses; against society's denigration of working women; against the legal status of married women who had to give over their dowries and fortunes to their husbands, thereby reducing them to slave status and keeping them virtual prisoners in their own homes'. The exploitation and second-class status of women is a theme that Brontë's second novel takes on even more directly, as the essays on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* demonstrate here.

Again, what enables Brontë to convey her moral and social outrage so powerfully is her ability to transform these issues into literary art. 'I love to give innocent pleasure' (30), Brontë writes in her 'Preface' to the second edition of *Wildfell Hall*, and the reader takes his or her pleasure from the way the story is told. Not surprisingly, Brontë's narrative choices have also been the subject of critical controversy, and the essays in this volume explore some of her narrative methods using different critical approaches. Garrett Stewart's essay, 'Narrative Economies in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*' addresses a common criticism leveled at Brontë's book, namely the 'openly odd' narrative structure of embedding one narrator's diary within the epistolary text of another narrator, thereby decentering the story. By exploring the text 'from the narrative ground up', Stewart attempts to answer the criticisms of the novel's narrative structure, pointing out that the novel has been 'blamed for failing to achieve at its center the directness it so markedly sets out to avoid'. In '“I speak of those I do know”: Witnessing as Radical Gesture in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*', Deborah Denenholz Morse approaches the issue of narrative structure in *Wildfell Hall* from a different angle, focusing on the ways in which Brontë's novel reads as testimony and, in its emphasis on reading as well as writing, almost forces the reader to become 'drawn into the role of witness'. The novel's readers thus become, according to Morse, judges of a society in which 'women and children suffer the domestic abuses chronicled in the novel'. Moreover, Brontë's 'pervasive use of the Bible as the undergirding structure of her novel points to the sacred Word as the legitimating source of her own words' which thus constitute 'a new vision of social and moral responsibility'. From a more specifically Christian perspective, the structure of *Agnes Grey* is more straightforward, but the essays in this collection demonstrate that even here, Brontë carefully chose her structure and symbolism to further her moral, social, and literary ends. Larry H. Peer's 'The First Chapter of *Agnes Grey*: An Analysis of the Sympathetic Narrator' presents the reader with Brontë's narrative challenge: How can she 'secure and maintain the sympathy of the audience for a hero with a character flaw?'. Peer's investigation of Chapter One examines Brontë's careful and effective use of symbolism. Marilyn Sheridan Gardner also works with symbolism in Brontë's first novel. In '"The food of my life": Agnes Grey at Wellwood House', Gardner examines the 'elaborate scenes of eating' in the novel's first ten chapters and concludes that '[w]hen Brontë places Agnes among the Bloomfields, she elevates dining into an educational exercise

and raises eating into a metaphor for the way of life at Wellwood House'. This extended analogy reinforces Agnes' movement 'from the sacred confines of the parsonage to the profane venue of the worldly Bloomfields'.

The essays in this collection represent a diversity of theoretical and critical approaches, a factor that speaks to the richness of Anne Brontë's texts. *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë* offers new readings of Anne Brontë's novels and life and suggests new critical frameworks with which to approach them. While many of these essays place Brontë's writings in the context of her life and make comparisons to the more famous works of her sisters, they also recognize that her novels can and should stand alone. Brontë's narrative methods, her social criticism, and her religious convictions are individually worthy of study. Understood together, as we hope this collection will make possible, they reveal that the literary accomplishments of Anne Brontë make her an artist in her own right.

Note

¹ These elaborate stories and games were the beginning of the literary and artistic life of the Brontë children. They would evolve into the 'Great Glass Town' essays, stories, pictures, histories, and songs. Over the years, the Brontës would produce thousands of words of writing before they ever attempted publication.

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Julie Nash
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Chapter 1

Contextualizing Anne Brontë's Bible

Maria Frawley

'What, Where, and How Shall I Be When I Have Got Through?'¹ With this not-so-simple question before her, Anne Brontë embarked on a mission to read and study the Bible. Her notes indicate that her project was 'begun about December 1841'. Twenty years old, Brontë was likely at the time to have been working as a governess for the Robinson family of Thorp Green, although contemplating a permanent return home to establish a school with her sisters. Although she had begun to write poetry, both on her own and as part of the collaborative project known as the Gondal and Angrian Chronicles, it would be six more years before she published her first novel, *Agnes Grey*. All that we now know of this Bible-reading project is what can be deduced from the notes made on the Bible's flyleaves. She evidently worked her way through the entire text of the Old Testament, diligently noting the chapters and verses of particular interest to her. The first such entry notes passages from the Book of Deuteronomy, and the last from the Book of Malachi. The end page is dated 'April 30, 1843', and is followed by a passage from the Book of Proverbs (16.23), which reads, 'A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth and a word spoken in due season. [H]ow good is it'.

Biographers have long acknowledged that information about Anne Brontë's life is scant. As Juliet Barker writes in her introduction to *The Brontës*, a family biography, 'Though many have tried, it is impossible to write an authoritative biography of either of the two youngest Brontë sisters. The known facts of their lives could be written on a single sheet of paper; their letters, diary papers and drawings would not fill two dozen' (xviii). Even Edward Chitham, author of *A Life of Anne Brontë*, acknowledges that 'there are few documents directly relating to the life of Anne Brontë which could rank with the kind of primary sources usually studied by biographers', and concludes that 'we have to look elsewhere for ways to build up a picture of Anne Brontë and her life' (5-6).

Anne Brontë's Bible is evidently one such place, although commentators of her life and writing, including Chitham, have overlooked it. Given the sensitivity of Brontë's biographers to the importance of primary source evidence, it is especially perplexing that her Bible notes, which clearly constitute a sort of primary source evidence, have for so long gone unstudied. One explanation for this apparent lapse is that the Bible is housed not at Haworth Library, which holds most of the materials relevant to Brontë's life, but rather at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City. Perhaps more importantly, though, the notes on the flyleaves do not lend themselves to obvious interpretation. Brontë did not annotate the notes with

commentary to clarify what the particular chapters and verses meant to her; rather, she simply listed chapters and verses, occasionally indicating special emphasis by underlining or writing 'esp.' for especially. Yet even this descriptive fact about her efforts and methods is potentially significant. This essay will suggest a few of the ways that the Bible notes might prove enlightening.

On the most basic level, Brontë's efforts to study the Bible reveal one of the ways that religious belief was *practiced* in Victorian England. As an apparently private pursuit, her project can give students of the period a glimpse into one of the ways that religious belief was expressed and practiced – that is, the everyday phenomenon of religiosity that tends to be overlooked by historical accounts, stressing as they do the public and institutional mechanisms for the expression of belief. As Robin Gilmour has written, 'religious experience in this period should not be confined to what happened or did not happen in churches and synagogues. William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) is a much better title for a study of Victorian religion than that old music-hall turn, Faith and Doubt' (94). Even scholarly works sensitive to the need to address the variety of religious beliefs and practices of ordinary people tend to concentrate, Gail Malmgreen explains, 'not on the interior world of belief, but on the public expression of religion, and on religion as an engine of social action' (8). Brontë's study of the Bible exemplifies both a 'variety of religious experience' and the kind of private practice to which Malmgreen here refers, and suggests one of the ways that an individual's 'interior world of belief' was exercised and shaped.

The significance of Brontë's Bible is not just limited to what it reveals about variations of Victorian religious experience and history; it enables one to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of her personal religiosity than that currently available in scholarship about her. For reasons I will examine in more detail in this essay, Brontë scholars have treated Anne Brontë's religion rather reductively. Only recently have they begun to critique the received versions of Brontë's religion, which depicts her as quietly pious and distinctly orthodox in her beliefs. Brontë's Bible study has implications both for our understanding of Victorian social history and for Brontë's personal history. Although seemingly separate, these threads in fact converge through a shared emphasis on the boundaries between obedience and initiative and the role of the individual in achieving a kind of self-reformation.

Contextualizing Brontë's Bible Study

No social or intellectual history of the Victorian period is without an extensive section on religion, and although an adequate summary of the vast literature on the topic is beyond the purview of this essay, it is clear that Anne Brontë's Bible study belongs to a particular historical moment in the religious experience of her nation. 'The religious life of this period was intense and disputatious', Gilmour writes, 'and

its problematic presence can be felt wherever we look in nineteenth-century literature' (63). Brontë lived and wrote precisely at the time that many of the most public manifestations of religious crisis emerged, with attempts at the reformation of the structure of the Church of England, conflicts with Dissenting or Nonconformist churches, and reaction to German historical criticism of the Bible being three of the most often-cited examples of the alleged crisis. More pervasive, if less difficult to pin down, is the evangelical temper associated with this period, one linked as inextricably, Richard Altick shows, to a middle-class ethos and the rise of industrialism as to distinctions between 'high church', 'low church', and 'broad church'.²

Adding another dimension of complexity to this moment in Britain's religious history is, of course, the concomitant and relatively rapid development of many areas of science. Many literary historians have seen in these developments, particularly in advances in geological findings during the first half of the century, a source for the expressions of religious doubt that seem to accrue throughout the literature of the period and that provide a backdrop to expressions of faith. Advances in scientific understanding complicate considerably the version of religious life that would exist were one to examine only early Victorian conflicts within sects associated with definitions of low, broad, and high church. Nevertheless, as Gilmour persuasively argues of 'first-generation Victorians', which would include Anne Brontë:

It has become increasingly clear that their objections to Christianity were overwhelmingly *moral*, objections to certain key doctrines of evangelical religion in which some had been reared but all had experienced in the religious culture of the time. The Atonement, chiefly, hell, everlasting punishment, original sin – a God who required the obedience of his creatures on those terms was a God who did not deserve worshipping. . . ' (87)

Although Brontë cannot be said to belong to a group of early- to mid-Victorians 'object[ing]' to Christianity, she clearly did concern herself with the very concepts and doctrines that Gilmour lists here, perhaps most significantly, as her Bible notes suggest, with the nature of obedience. And, while her Bible study does not reveal a movement from faith to doubt or vice-versa, it does suggest an urge to learn about and think through for herself the doctrines that occupied public debate.

Despite the insights that social historians have made about religious belief in Victorian England, it is difficult to further contextualize Brontë's project because relatively little is known about institutionalized or private Bible study in nineteenth-century England. Popular works of Biblical commentary by Richard Mant and George D'Oyly were published and updated well into the Victorian period, as was Thomas Hartwell Horne's 1818 *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*. These are the types of works to which, for example,

major public figures such as William Gladstone turned when they embarked on a systematic study of the Bible.³ Little information exists within Brontë family history, however, to help us place Anne's Bible study relative to that which other family members may have conducted, or to understand what motivated her to undertake her reading at this particular moment in her life. Beginning at roughly the same time she commenced her position as a governess at Thorp Green, she may have anticipated reading and studying the Bible with the children under her care. One might similarly speculate that she sought in Biblical passages solace while in a difficult and isolating situation. Nevertheless, nothing about her Bible study is mentioned in her 1841 diary paper nor in anything else I have discovered by or about Anne Brontë. It was apparently undertaken in private and, like so much about Brontë's work, has gone unrecognized by biographers and critics as well.

One can safely assume that Brontë's study of the Bible reflects a desire to achieve a more thorough understanding of the scriptures than she presumably got through listening to Sunday sermons or through discussions with her family members. Her pursuit implies as well that she assumed personal responsibility for her relationship with God, an idea that was at the heart of Anglican Evangelicalism.⁴ Both Anglican Evangelicals and Methodists argued for the individual right – even duty – to read and study the Bible for one's self. As Christine Krueger writes,

Attacking the mystification of scripture that demanded of 'legitimate' readers expertise available to a select few, they maintained that God would reveal to babes what he concealed from the wise. Indeed, scripture itself imposed on the individual a duty to attend to that Word, the authority to interpret it, and the duty to spread it – to speak for God. (8)

Many Victorians embarked at various points in their lives on relatively systematic studies of the Bible in the spirit that Krueger here summarizes. Suggesting the centrality of Bible study to the evangelical mood that characterized the first half of the century, Altick notes that the 'Bible, interpreted with utmost literalism, was the supreme guide to conduct' (165-66). 'In addition to a common literary and argumentative vocabulary', he writes, 'the Bible provided the accepted cosmogony, a considerable part of ancient history as it was then known, and above all the foundations of his morality' (203). It is in the end fruitless to try to ascertain with more precision Brontë's motivations in undertaking this project or to determine with any precision the gradations of influence that Methodism and Anglican Evangelicalism had on her own beliefs – or, for that matter, attitudinal differences toward Bible study within these groups. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Brontë, like most of the general educated public, was steeped in this dimension of her cultural heritage. The extensive notes jotted down on her Bible's flyleaves should be understood as a manifestation of this cultural heritage.